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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000037

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SUBJECT: PANAMA HOSTS QUADRILATERAL SECURITY TALKS WITH
COLOMBIA, GUATEMALA, AND MEXICO

Classified By: POLCOUNS Brian R. Naranjo. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Security Talks: Moving Out Bad Guys Top Priority

1. (C) "We are trying to put in place information sharing and coordination mechanisms to expedite quick deportations, expulsions, and extradition of organized crime figures," First VP and FM Samuel Lewis told Ambassador on January 15 in laying out his vision for the quadrilateral Panama-Colombia-Guatemala-Mexico security talks scheduled to begin on January 16 in Panama City. Lewis noted that Panama had succeeded in securing "the highest level participation" for this conference, including the Attorneys General of Mexico, Colombia, and Panama as well as other top level police and internal security leaders and foreign ministry representatives. Heads of state/government would also attend. "We aim to start small with these four countries and then expand once procedures and operations are in place," Lewis explained. "New participants will have to sign up to the procedures and mechanisms that we develop. Working groups (mesas de trabajo) will provide structure to this undertaking and establish procedures for collaboration, Lewis added. "In the coming weeks," Lewis said, "I hope to see a significant up-tick in deportations, expulsions and extraditions of bad guys to face justice in the prospective countries." Additionally, he noted how Panama's experience was an excellent example of how information sharing could be harnessed to great effect to secure big advances against narcotics traffickers despite limited resources.

Darien Not Topic of Discussion, per se

2. (C) While Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and Panamanian President Martin Torrijos would meet on the margins of this meeting during which they would discuss the situation in Panama's Darien province, Lewis clarified that the Darien, per se, would not be a specific topic of discussion. If the Darien were to be discussed, it would be handled in the context of how to deal with organized criminal groups operating in

this sensitive Panamanian province that abutting Colombia.

Very Concerns About Guatemala

13. (C) Lewis noted that Guatemala was the weakest player among the four countries that would participate in this effort. "We (i.e., Panama, Mexico, and Colombia) are very concerned that the security situation in Guatemala is spinning out of control," Lewis explained. "Guatemala lacks the institutions and capacity to deal with the rising crime that it is experiencing." Hopefully, this endeavor would provide Guatemala some needed assistance and breathing space, Lewis explained.

Comment

14. (C) The driving force behind Panama's desire to host this conference and facilitate this process is to address Panama's desire to: (1) clear out as quickly as possible high-level organized crime figures that Panama does not want to hold, and (2) prevent international organized crime organizations, particularly Mexican cartels and groups, from establishing themselves on Panamanian territory. In advance of the May 3 general elections, during which every elected seat in the country will be up for grabs, security concerns -- violent crime, gang violence, and general delinquency -- have topped the list of issues on the forefront of Panamanian voters'

PANAMA 00000037 002 OF 002

minds, several polls confirm. Lewis' multilateral effort should be understood as an attempt to respond to these concerns while also denying international criminal organizations the ability to establish a presence in Panama, a presence that would likely accelerate a deterioration in law and order on Panama's streets. Panama has a rich and extensive network of law enforcement and security relations with the United States. The GOP and USG consult constantly at multiple levels and often through complementary channels on a broad panoply of law enforcement operations and other cooperation. Panama is now seeking to initiate a process that it hopes will extend and build a similar network with key partners and neighbors in the hemisphere. The USG is well positioned to collaborate, compare notes, and cooperate as Panama launches this promising initiative.
STEPHENSON